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Writing Center Administration: Learning the Numbers Game

[Spring 2010 / Focus](#)

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Saving writing centers in the face of budgetary cuts



Daniel Reardon

It's all in the numbers. I wish it wasn't, but I became acutely aware of the qualitative pressure placed on writing centers when I became not only assistant director of our university's writing center, but also when I filled in as acting director while our current director began her research leave. Since I had previously spent a significant amount of time conferencing with my own students in the center itself and knew the tutors and staff well, I was aware of the role in a writing center's survival that numbers play in a service branch of a university—in other words, how many students use our tutoring services. Our situation may serve as an example of many such dilemmas writing centers face in this recession.

No writing center administrator can ever rest too comfortably in regards to his or her center's continued support or funding, especially during recessions. Our university serves nearly 6,500 full-time undergraduate, graduate, and part-time students. Like many other writing centers, ours relies on the cooperation and support of several engineering, science, technology, business, and IST departments, in addition to the regular support we receive from the humanities. Perhaps because of our natural connection with the humanities and the English department in particular, the vast majority of our tutees come to us for help with assignments in their Comp I course—the only writing course required of undergraduates at the university.

The year before all these changes occurred, our numbers at the center had been better than ever. Would the same happen again, after so much administrative and instructional change?

During the last academic year, we had seen our numbers at the Writing Center spike, due in large part, I think, to our now pedagogically unified Composition I course, complete with a common rubric, a limited choice of textbooks, and a common number of essay assignments. Most importantly for the Writing Center,

many Comp I instructors required writing center visits as part of their students' course grades, though such a requirement was ultimately left up to the discretion of each instructor. Within a year, writing center attendance increased almost 40%. The next year, almost immediately upon becoming a staff member at the Center, I felt a self-imposed need to "keep the numbers up."

That wouldn't be easy. The English department, naturally our strongest ally, was undergoing changes. The composition faculty, in particular, experienced the most significant change. As a full-time lecturer in English at the university prior to my accepting the position at the Writing Center, I had always been responsible for at least two, and sometimes four sections of our Composition I course. In our first year with a common Comp I course, I had required three separate visits to the Writing Center for each of my Comp I students. I feared that my absence from teaching for a year while filling in for the Center director could affect our attendance numbers, and send precisely the wrong message to university administration at a time when such administrators were anxiously looking for areas to reduce or cut entirely, facing statewide higher educational funding shortfalls.

My absence from Comp I wouldn't be the only one. Another full-time lecturer, also responsible for several Comp I sections, and himself a supporter of the Writing Center, moved on to a tenure-track position at another university. Additionally, the English chair retired in 2009, so our new English chair faced a great many enrollment and staffing challenges. Freshmen enrollment at our university for fall 2009 was at its highest since its historical peak in the late 1970's. That increased enrollment meant an even greater need for Comp I instructors, just after two of us had left. The English chair, needing instructors to teach increasing sections of Comp I in the fall of 2009, was forced to hire adjuncts to the faculty on a course-by-course basis. Therefore, just as I was starting my administrative time at the Writing Center, I had to connect with an entirely new group of Comp I instructors, and hope they would see the important service we provided at the Center.

Fortunately, the Director of Composition, himself new to the position, strongly encouraged new Comp I instructors to require Writing Center visits. His support caused me to recall another old adage, which for us accompanied the one about numbers—"be careful what you wish for." The year before all these changes occurred, our numbers at the center had been better than ever. Would the same happen again, after so much administrative and instructional change? This fiscal year, when federal stimulus money would run out, I felt an even more urgent need to justify our place at the university.

During my first series of emails to instructors, asking for admittance to do my ten-minute spiel on the Center and hand out brochures about us, I first experienced that feeling of a sales rep, calling on potential buyers of my wares.

In an attempt to keep our tutoring numbers where they had been the previous year, I learned a new skill—sales rep. A certain amount of marketing has always been necessary for writing centers. We not only have to make incoming students aware of where we are and what tutoring services we offer, but also constantly remind current students that we exist. Most writing centers, I've learned, are in similar marketing situations as ours. We have to maintain a form of advertising, often through flyers posted around campus, notices in the university's online newsletter, and solicitations for classroom visits. Many other

writing centers publish newsletters, maintain blogs, and advertise in the school newspapers. I then hit the campus streets—the Assistant Director’s tradition each semester—speaking in classes about our tutoring services at the Writing Center.

These classroom visits may be perhaps the most important—and I hope the most effective—way of getting the word out regarding who and what we are at the Writing Center. Many students, I learned, aren’t even sure where we are. As an instructor, I had always welcomed these visits from my predecessor—a dynamic, enthusiastic speaker who always made the Writing Center seem like friendly, helpful, and inviting place. I hoped I could maintain that same positive atmosphere. During my first series of emails to instructors, asking for admittance to do my ten-minute spiel on the Center and hand out brochures about us, I first experienced that feeling of a sales rep, calling on potential buyers of my wares. After sending dozens of emails two weeks before the start of the fall Semester, I was disappointed in receiving so few replies. Over half of the instructors I emailed simply ignored my request. Their lack of acknowledgment could mean many things, I know, but I couldn’t help feel like my time—or perhaps the Writing Center—just wasn’t valuable for them.

After checking my predecessor’s archived classroom visit schedules from past semesters, I realized the same few instructors, year after year, accepted offers for classroom visits. The rest simply ignored us, for whatever reason. As all of us in writing centers struggle to serve our student populations, support from faculty is critical. Was I receiving that support? I’m still not sure, and am searching for ways to find out.

And as I feared they would be, our numbers were slightly down from last fall semester by about 100 visits, roughly the numbers represented by my students the previous year. As it happened, the new full-time English instructors hadn’t been the problem. During the first week of the fall semester, I had donned my “sales rep hat” again, and spoke in person with both new full-time English instructors, who were responsible for a combined eight sections of Comp I. Talking with the new English instructors must have had some effect; they were our biggest support during the fall semester 2009—a total of 171 visits between their eight sections of Comp I. Perhaps their support came in part from the rapport we built; in other words, going door to door, meeting instructors personally may have helped. In fact, those English classes in which I did not make a presentation showed the lowest numbers of students using the Writing Center. Old adage reaffirmed—it pays to advertise.

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Of the 706 undergraduate students who visited the Writing Center in the fall of 2009, 391—well over half—were from English courses. Another 189 came from two instructors who required Writing Center visits in their large engineering courses. Therefore, 82% of the students who made use of the Writing Center came from either English courses or from engineering courses that required visits. The remaining 18% of student visits were scattered across 88 other instructors, in whose classes often only one or two students visited us. While my connection with the English department was as strong as ever, obviously I wasn’t reaching the engineering, science, business, or IT departments nearly

enough. In talking and corresponding with other writing center administrators, I've learned that this struggle for recognition and support is endemic to tutoring services at almost every educational level.

So how can I reach out to other departments in addition to English? In my search for answers, I turned to the work of my peers. Barbara Szubinska and Sherry Robinson argue in favor of attendance models and outreach, stating that increased student visits and developing support for writing centers across the disciplines "is indicative of the effectiveness of our methods and of our desire to extend our reach" (12-14). However, regarding quantitative analysis of writing center use, Peter Carino and Doug Enders, despite their qualitative research on writing center attendance and satisfaction, warn us that a positivistic framework for numbers analysis ignores the immeasurable value of what we do at writing centers (102).

Carino and Enders' study also examines student satisfaction, rather than sheer attendance numbers. Their research certainly contains lessons for me; of course my primary concern is with our effectiveness as a writing center. We can't be effective, though, if we don't exist. The raw numbers—not who, but how many use the center—mean the most to those who fund us. And while Aubrey Rhodes encourages us to consider our writing centers as businesses with a product to sell, telling us that "If we can all take the simple business approach, the writing center can be a major success with a permanent existence" (11), I'm left wondering just how "simple" that business approach is—I've found it anything but. I'm certainly more comfortable talking qualitatively about what an undeniable benefit the writing center is for the student community, but I wonder just how much weight those qualitative arguments have.

As a looming date with our administrative supervisors at the university approaches, and I scan our total number of tutoring sessions with last semester, I can't help but be a bit concerned. Each department in our administrative wing of the university has been asked to create estimates for a 3%, 5%, 7%, or 9% budget reduction for the next fiscal year. If we eliminate Friday and Sunday tutoring, we won't save quite enough for a 3% reduction. But cutting hours means we're not available to do the very thing we're supposed to—assist students with their writing. Any other reduction besides personnel would exhaust our expense and equipment budget. In our upcoming meeting with the administration, we have to convince them that not only do we provide a valuable service—which of course, we do—but as well that budget cuts must pass us by. While we could endure a small reduction in our expense and equipment budget, anything else will increasingly cripple our ability to function at the Writing Center.

Lightly armed with my problematic attendance numbers and the support of a few instructors who recognize our value, I can only hope that it's enough to keep us intact in this very tenuous budget year, when schools and colleges across the country are facing cuts. And during budget conversations with our administration, while I'll do my best to steer conversations away—as I should—from numbers to value, the tension remains. Attendance can improve, and we can do more to improve our visibility. We just need the time and the funding to do it. And while I believe—okay, I hope—that our center is not in any real danger, it's a critical time to show our real worth. I also think it's the right time to show what our writing center will do to improve. It's time to make the numbers work for us.

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